

BIRDS OF BEDOUT ISLAND—A VISIT IN MAY 1972

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INTRODUCTION

Bedout Island (19° 35' 28" S., 119° 5' 46" E.) is a Class C reserve 22 nautical miles north of Larrey Point, the nearest part of the Australian mainland, but 55 nautical miles NNE of Port Hedland via the navigation channels. It is of interest to naturalists as it is the most southerly recorded breeding station in Western Australia of the Lesser Frigate-bird and of the Brown and Masked Gannets. However because of the difficulty of access ornithologists have rarely visited it.

The first ornithological survey of the island was made by J. T. Tunney (1902, p. 73) who collected there in May 1901 for the W.A. Museum. In 1944 the island was surveyed from the air by Stanley Fowler during an aerial reconnaissance for the CSIRO. In October 1949 Dr. D. L. Serventy spent a few hours on the island whilst a member of a fisheries party aboard the F.R.V. *Warreen*. In his report (Serventy, 1952, pp. 48-50) he reviewed all the previous records.

The Lands and Surveys Department granted a lease of the island to Bernard Bardwell, Marie Fanny Harper and John David Dunn from January 1, 1928 to December 31, 1937, for the purpose of excavating guano. This was cancelled in 1930, prior to expiration, on a report from the Pearling Inspector at Broome, Mr. A. O. Ferguson, who stated that no guano had come through the port.

On May 14-15, 1972 we accompanied a fishing party from Port Hedland and spent a night and a total of 15 daylight hours on the island. Landing was made in a small dinghy, leaving the larger vessel anchored beyond the reef.

Bedout Island is a low-lying, undulating sand cay with an area of 45 acres at high tide and about 75 acres at low tide, surrounded by a white sandy beach varying from 20 to 75 metres in width. The large expanse of reef exposed at low tide is studded with pools in which marine life abounds. The rock stacks which protrude above the general level of the reef are covered with oysters. The island itself, apart from the two bare areas where heavy guano accumulation prevents plant growth, is covered with clumps of *Spinifex longifolius*. An automatic navigation beacon stands on the highest point of the island.

NOTES ON BIRDS OBSERVED

Brown Gannet, *Sula leucogaster*. This species was the commonest bird on the island, occupying almost the whole of it for nesting and we estimated there were about 5,000 breeding pairs. Nests were on the beach, with concentrations where the beach was widest, as well as amongst the *Spinifex* clumps. Breeding was protracted in the extreme. There were young at all stages, while other pairs were brooding eggs or constructing nests. Nests among *Spinifex* clumps, where material was readily available, were generally more substantial than those on the beaches. Here some eggs had been laid in a mere scrape in the sand. Two eggs were the normal clutch, with only one 3-egg clutch being observed. All nests inspected where the eggs had hatched contained only one chick. Brooding birds were very confiding, allowing easy photography. A few thousand birds were resting on the beaches. These included many immatures. A sample of 10 eggs averaged 61 x 40 mm, varying from 56-66 x 36-43 mm.

Masked Gannet, *Sula dactylatra*. This species was nowhere near as plentiful as the preceding and we estimated the breeding population as about 400 pairs. Apart from an isolated pair breeding took place among the Brown Gannets in the two bare areas and the major beach concentrations. Breeding was protracted as with the Brown Gannet. The nests were generally not as substantial and were quite often only a scrape in

the guano crust. The clutch was of two eggs. A sample of 10 eggs averaged 62 x 44 mm, varying from 55-68 x 40-45 mm.

Lesser Frigate-bird, *Fregata ariel*. The estimated breeding population was about 2,000 pairs in a single, large, spread-out colony. The nests were closer together where good stands of *Spinifex* occurred. Breeding was protracted. Some birds were still constructing nests and others were caring for large young, but a high proportion were still brooding eggs, near-fresh in appearance. Nests were platforms of *Spinifex* stems cemented with their excreta and built on the tops of *Spinifex* clumps. Sitting birds sat tightly, "clacking" their bills loudly as we walked through the colony. The entire colony studded with the brilliant red inflated gular sacs of the males was a spectacular sight. The sacs were deflated as we approached each section of the colony. A single egg formed the clutch. The average size of a sample of 10 eggs was 63 x 45 mm, varying from 56 - 72 x 41 - 48 mm.

Crested Tern, *Sterna bergii*. An estimated 300 pairs were nesting in close proximity in four groups near the summit of the island. All nests contained either one egg or one chick. A sample of 10 eggs averaged 61 x 40 mm, varying from 57-65 x 35-44 mm.

Lesser Crested Tern, *Sterna bengalensis*. The presence of this species on Bedout Island was first noted by Serventy who, though he saw large numbers of individuals, failed to find any evidence of breeding. We located one nesting pair, incubating an egg near the middle of a group of about 100 nesting Crested Terns. We disturbed the group briefly several times and the sitting bird invariably returned to the same egg. This measured 55 x 37 mm. Several other birds of the species were feeding large young hidden among the *Spinifex* close to the water's edge.

Roseate Tern, *Sterna dougallii*. Several hundred of this species were observed during the voyage, in flocks of up to 100 birds, feeding on schools of small fish. Only an odd bird was noted at the island and they were not breeding.

Common Noddy, *Anous stolidus*. A flock of several thousand were perched on the tops of *Spinifex* clumps. When disturbed by our approach they flew, settling on the beach near the water's edge, so close that they appeared as a brown mass. While there was no evidence of breeding their behaviour suggested this was imminent. Tunney collected eggs on May 21, 1901; there was no nesting on Serventy's visit on October 19, 1949.

A single pair of a dark tern, either the Sooty, *Sterna fuscata*, or the Bridled, *S. anaethetus*, were present and incubating an egg on the bare sand among the *Spinifex*. Positive identification of the species was not made. The egg measured 49 x 35 mm. Tunney recorded both species breeding on his visit.

Reef Heron, *Egretta sacra*. A pair of white-phase birds were flushed from among the *Spinifex*.

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